



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser

Out of the Attic

Two superstar architects and their buildings

Alexandria Times, May 14, 2020

Image: Kahn's Ford Plant in the 1930s.

Alexandria is known throughout the country for its brick aesthetic and its early devotion to historic preservation, but it has also long had buildings designed by superstar architects.

We could start with Benjamin Henry Latrobe's design of St. Paul's Episcopal Church. Or Alexandria native Glenn Brown's mark on his hometown with his design of 228 N. Columbus St. But this column will focus on two 20th century buildings.

First, let us remember the Albert Kahn-designed Ford Plant that graced Alexandria's waterfront from 1932 to 1996. We also highlight Charles Goodman's modernist buildings both on Quaker Lane and the Hollins Hills neighborhood which serve as a reminder of one of the major forces in architecture in the suburban D.C. metro area.



Kahn is perhaps best known for his design of many buildings on the University of Michigan campus in the first decade of the 20th century. While he is sometimes confused with Louis Kahn, another famous architect, his base of work was in Michigan, not Pennsylvania.

Perhaps it should not be a surprise that his client in Alexandria was a Michigan company. The Ford Plant was unusual on the Alexandria waterfront because it was one of the few industrial buildings on the waterfront where the formal ornamented facade faced the Potomac River rather than a street. This orientation was not typical of other industrial buildings that lined the waterfront and attracted special notice.

The working drawings for the Alexandria Ford Plant were completed by Kahn's office on Jan. 27, 1932, and the plant was occupied by the Ford Motor Company less than 10 months later on Oct. 17 of that year. The Ford Plant represented the mature years of the work of Kahn. He had begun designing industrial buildings beginning in 1903, and 29 years had streamlined his design process.

The plant's structural system of a steel frame with butterfly trusses on a concrete slab supported by wood piers, use of brick veneer and its steel curtain wall windows were all elements found on other industrial buildings by Kahn, as well as numerous other firms. Ford used the plant until 1942 when the federal government requisitioned it. The building was demolished in 1996. Today, the site is the residential neighborhood of Ford's Landing.

A couple of decades after Kahn, prominent post-World War II architect Charles Goodman left Alexandria two important historic legacies. The first was his personal residence at 514 N. Quaker Lane. Originally built around 1870, Goodman purchased a Victorian farmhouse in 1946, and converted it into the International Style.

The house is most notable for Goodman's use of glass on the exterior. Goodman also designed the Hollins Hills neighborhood, which is now designated a historic district. Perhaps building on the



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aesthetic of his residence, Hollins Hills is a testament to Goodman's modernist tastes, with 475 residences built in eight house types in 15 different combinations.

While the Ford plant is gone, perhaps you will enjoy viewing the houses left to us by Goodman – when we are allowed out of our residences. These buildings designed by Kahn and Goodman are proof that not every Alexandria architectural gem was built with red brick or in Old Town.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.